Urban Cannibalism: The City as Predator in Adiga's *Last Man in Tower*

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Abstract

The paper is a study of urban cannibalism as a metaphor for predatory capitalism in *Last Man in Tower* by Aravind Adiga. Set in metropolitan cities like Mumbai, the novel highlights that the city is not only a geographical space but also a consuming force that devours ethical values, innocence of city's dwellers, communal bonds, and individual integrity. Through the conflict surrounding the redevelopment of Vishram Society, Adiga exposes how real-estate capitalism transforms neighbours into competitors and solidarity into suspicion. The promise of economic mobility becomes a mechanism of moral erosion, where survival is conditioned by complicity and silence. The study is an argument about the functions of metropolis like Mumbai as a predatory organism structured by neoliberal greed and spatial violence. Like the other cities, Mumbai has high-rise towers and Skyscrapers buildings, symbolizing aspiration and modernity; simultaneously it is a site of coercion, surveillance, and dispossession. By foregrounding the tragic resistance of Masterji, the novel *Last Man in Tower* is tale of psychological and ethical consequences of urban redevelopment that uncovers how capitalist desire consumes or devours the human relationships. Drawing on theories of urban studies and neo-capitalism, the paper is a reimagining of the contemporary Indian cities like, Mumbai as a cannibal and predator where profit supersedes humanity. Ultimately, the paper is an effort that reveals the illusion of progress in post-liberalization India by portraying the city as a predator that consumes its own inhabitants, exposing the fragile morality underlying urban modernity.

Keywords: Urban Cannibalism, Predatory Capitalism, Neoliberal Urbanism, Moral Decay, Urban Redevelopment, Destruction of Community life, Environmental and Human Cost

Review of Literature:

After independence, a significant boom can be observed in contemporary Indian English writing due to its innovative narrative techniques and its engagement with comprehensive and previously unexplored themes that consistently attract the critical attention of scholars, philosophers, and critics. Consequently, Indian English literature has become a vast and fertile field for academic research. One of the most compelling writers in this tradition is Aravind Adiga, whose works continually attract researchers and critics. Numerous scholars have applied their critical insights to examine and re-examine his writings. For instance, B. Mariappan et al., in *"The Dark Side of India: The Sociological Issues in Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger and Last Man in Tower"*; Rajkumar Bera in *"Circulation of Power and Construction of Identity: Reconfiguring Cultural Exigency and Populism in Aravind Adiga's Last Man*

in Tower"; S. Kirubakaran and S. Azariah in *"Aravind Adiga's Last Man in Tower:* A Replica of Contemporary Indian Society*"*; Rositta Joseph Valiyamattam in *"Aravind Adiga's Last Man in Tower:* Survival Strategies in a Moral Ambivalent Society"; and Maneeta Kahlon in *"Conceptualising* Bombay City as a Character in Aravind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower"* have all offered significant critical perspectives on Adiga's works. However, despite these scholarly contributions, several areas remain unexplored. Therefore, I have chosen the topic "Urban Cannibalism: The City as Predator in Adiga's *Last Man in Tower*" to further investigate a relatively untouched dimension of the novel.

Introduction:

Born in 1974, Aravind Adiga is an Indian-Australian writer who writes extensively about modern urban India. In his writings, Mumbai appears in a new light, revealing the complexities and contradictions of metropolitan life. His novel *Last Man in Tower* serves as a powerful reflection of a city that is gradually decaying in many of its parts—driven by the desire for overnight fortunes, while the ideals of humanity and harmonious living are often neglected. The novel further reveals that a city like Mumbai functions as an urban landscape where fantasies of development, artificial progress, and rapid modernization ultimately destroy the innocence of its dwellers and immigrants who migrate to the city in order to fulfill their dreams of a better life.

Published in 2011, *Last Man in Tower* by Aravind Adiga presents the story of an innocent migrant schoolteacher, Masterji, who moves to the rapidly expanding metropolis of Mumbai with dreams of growth and stability. Like many migrants in the city, he hopes to achieve dignity and security when opportunities appear. Adiga vividly captures the deceptive nature of urban prosperity, noting that "the city of wealth was playing its usual cat-and-mouse games with migrants: gives them a sniff of success and money in one breath, and makes them wonder about the value of success and the point of money in the next" (322). In Vishram Housing Society, particularly Tower B, the residents—mostly ambitious young executives eager for upward mobility—quickly and unanimously decide to vacate their apartments when a lucrative redevelopment offer is made.

This episode reflects the rapidly changing reality of Mumbai, where the desire for social and economic mobility shapes the choices and moral outlook of its inhabitants. However, as the narrative unfolds, the city gradually assumes a cannibalistic character, consuming the innocence and simplicity of its dwellers. Those who migrate to the city in the hope of a better and smoother life often find themselves morally compromised. As Adiga observes, "It doesn't always improve. A man is innocent because he has not had a chance at corruption; man is like a goat tied to a pole. Meaning, all of us have some free will but not too much" (44). Thus, when opportunity and greed intersect, ordinary individuals may transform into mercenary figures, even capable of violence and moral betrayal.

As the story of the novel move ahead, it is clearly seen that Masterji who is the most beloved person and well wisher of the Vishram Society turned into a Monster and the most person of the society. Hereby, Masterji who is simple schoolmaster and honest person to be become a victim of corruption, greed and lust of the other the inhabitants of Vishram Housing Society – and their greediness to grab the opportunity and becoming wealthy turned them human to predators. Masterji

is killed in the end of novel. Adiga uses the setting beautifully, the entire book can be summed up in the line that the city doesn't stop growing:

> Look: how this city never stops growing: rubble, shi-, plans, mulch, left to themselves, start slurping up sea, edging towards the other end of the bay like a snake's tongue, hissing through salt water, there is more land here, more land… All of Bombay was created like this: through the desire of junk and landfill, on which the reclaimed city sits, to become something better. (146)

Throughout the novel, it is obvious that the city of Mumbai appears as a monster. The people who belong to rural area migrate in the city due to the city's vibrant economic activities so that they may get more economic opportunity. After having migrated in the city, the city reveals its monster outlook and trapped these immigrants by its fantasy life style, artificial and sizzling environment so that they cannot leave the city and force them to live in unhygienic condition and lose their innocence and indulge in the crime to fulfill their basic requirements.

Similarly, one finds strands of sympathy for the developer, who could have been a caricature capitalist, and whose project is less about making money than it is about his need to leave some kind of tangible mark on the world. "What is Bombay?" "a window answers: banyan, maidan, stone, tile, tower, dome, sea, hawk, amaltas in bloom, smog on the horizon, gothic phantasmagoria (Victoria Terminus and the Municipal Building) emerging from the smog" (51).

Like other contemporary Indian English fiction writers, Aravind Adiga reveals how the rapid growth of urbanization devours the community life of metropolitan cities. At the beginning of the novel *Last Man in Tower*, it is clearly seen that Vishram Society is a tightly knit community. The residents of Vishram Society live a happy life: they gossip together, celebrate festivals, and rely on one another for small acts of help and support. Masterji, a retired teacher, is one of the most respected and beloved members of the society. However, the fortune of Vishram Society soon takes an unfortunate turn. When the residents receive Mr. Shah's lucrative offer to sell the building, their surface unity is exposed as fragile, and they gradually become enemies of one another. This situation also exposes the deeper reality of postmodern society. In the words of Adiga, "A society that had lived together for decades discovered how swiftly money could dissolve memory" (223). This statement reveals how human greed erases not only personal attachments but also social bonds. Neighbours who once trusted and admired Masterji begin to see him as an obstacle to their collective future. Slowly, his social world collapses: friends withdraw, allies turn against him, and his moral stand ultimately isolates him.

Throughout the novel, Aravind Adiga attempts to expose the hidden facets of city life that transform ordinary urban dwellers into demonic figures. In such a ruthless environment, the residents of the city cross the boundaries of humanity and metaphorically become cannibals. As evident in the novel *Last Man in Tower*, Masterji is an old man whose only wish is to continue living peacefully with the other members of Vishram Society. However, he refuses to sell his apartment to Mr. Shah, unlike the other residents of the society. This single decision turns the other members of the society against him. Driven by greed and the desire for financial gain, they gradually become metaphorical cannibals who resort to extreme levels of violence and torture against Masterji. Eventually, their brutality culminates in his murder. In the novel, Adiga tries to highlight that the society will decide that one man conscience

could not stand in the way of ninety men's progress. This thing show that how morality is compromised by collective interest. As a result, Violence, once unthinkable in this community, is accepted because it is committed in the name of modernization.

Throughout *the novel, Adiga* delves into the tension between individualism and community, a central theme within the framework of market capitalism. The title of the novel itself epitomizes the clash between the individual, represented by Master Ji, and the collective residents of Vishram Society. When the residents receive Shah's offer, their once-solid unity begins to disintegrate. Personal ambitions and desires for a better life drive wedges between neighbors, transforming friends into adversaries. This shift underscores capitalism's emphasis on individual success at the expense of collective welfare, illustrating how market forces can erode social cohesion and communal bonds. He encapsulates this erosion poignantly: "As wealth came to some, and misery to others, stories of gold and tears reached Vishram Society like echoes from a distant battlefield" (38).

Set in a bustling metropolitan city, the novel is a tale of Master Ji, like other residents, who are psychologically and emotionally weak, and Mr. Dharmen Shah, who is money-minded and a business tycoon. Master Ji fights a battle against Mr Shah, who manipulates the politics of the redevelopment project under the guise of beautifying the city, while his aim is to seize land to fulfill his financial greed. In pursuit of his ambitions, he deceives the innocent residents of Vishram Society, coercing them into socially ostracizing Master Ji. Despite his selfless dedication to the community, including teaching its children for free, his emotional attachment to his home leads him to reject Shah's offer. As a result of his defiance, Master Ji experiences a series of misfortunes, leaving him feeling utterly broken and frustrated. Through this narrative, Adiga poignantly captures the struggle of an individual against the corrupt forces in the name of urban redevelopment and its profound impact on his mental and emotional well-being. As Master Ji observes,

> If in the early days of the 'boycott', there was an apologetic smile on the Secretary's lips when he evaded Master ji's attempts to make small talk, now there were neither smiles nor apologies. *They treat me like they would treat an untouchable in the old days,* he thought: even at the thought of his shadow falling on them, his neighbours cringed and withdrew. Degree by degree, they were turning their faces from him, until, as he passed the parliament, he confronted a row of turned backs. (217)

Unlike the other novelists, Adiga tries to highlight that the development and modernization at the cost of decaying of communities and environmental life. The novel also addresses the environmental and social impacts of rapid urban development, revealing the detrimental consequences of unchecked market capitalism. As the city expands and luxury high-rises replace older, more affordable housing, pollution levels soar, resulting in significant health issues for residents. These adverse conditions force many to relocate to hilly areas for cleaner air and better living conditions. The construction of luxury high-rises, while symbolizing progress and modernity, comes at a steep cost. The displacement of long-standing communities and the destruction of affordable housing exacerbate social inequalities and highlight issues of sustainability and social justice. The novel critiques the shortsightedness of a system that prioritizes immediate profit over long-term well-being. Adiga illustrates how the relentless pursuit of economic

gain leads to environmental degradation and social fragmentation, suggesting that true progress requires a more balanced and inclusive approach that considers both the immediate and future impacts on society and the environment.

Throughout the novel, Adiga underscores the stark division between the affluent and the impoverished in the city. Mr Shah lives in an exclusive area inaccessible to low-income individuals, such as the sweepers who clean the area but are denied the privilege of enjoying the places they help maintain. Similarly, Verosa Beach is divided into two sections: one is reserved for the affluent, which use it for activities like yoga, tai-chi, and jogging, while the other, dirty and neglected, is left for the low-income populace. The general populace often assumes that the emerging middle class and the wealthy contribute to the city's pollution. Mrs. Puri, a resident of Vishram Society, articulates her frustration with the city's pollution and expresses a desire to leave once she receives money from Mr. Shah, stating, "Let's go to a civilized place like Pune. Some place where a thousand beggars don't come every morning by train. I'm sick of this city" (156). This division extends beyond physical spaces to institutional practices employed by the new middle class and the wealthy, thus marginalizing those with lower incomes and limited resources.

In conclusion, *Last Man in Tower* by Aravind Adiga is a disturbing yet realistic portrayal of the modern metropolis as a predatory force that devours human values, relationships, and moral integrity. Through the transformation of Vishram Society from a harmonious residential community into a site of greed, hostility, and violence, the novel exposes how rapid urbanization and capitalist aspirations erode the ethical foundations of social life. Once bound together by mutual trust and everyday interactions, the residents gradually become driven by the lure of wealth and material progress. In this process, they metaphorically turn into cannibals, sacrificing compassion, memory, and collective morality for personal gain.

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